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MUSIC VERSUS MATERIALISM

By ELISE FELLOWS WHITE

THE master-musician laid down the score he had been reading. "You had better study something useful," said he to the young man who stood before him;—"music is not useful."

The shade of bitterness in this last remark caught my attention. What did he mean—the great artist, whose name is synonymous with success, whose fame is assured both in the old world and in the new?

Did he, with subtle intuition, voice the unspoken thought of the student, whose indolence and indifference betrayed his lack of talent? Or did he, with gentle sarcasm, express the creed of an ignorant and perverse generation?—the new element in the melting-pot? Was it his sincere conviction—a conviction arrived at after years of artistic endeavor—that music is but an artificial ornament superimposed upon the façade of life, fulfilling no need, no vital purpose in the world?

Were it not for the fact that his sincerity is beyond dispute, his artistic integrity unchallenged, I should have been tempted to let the casual words, spoken half in jest, half in earnest, pass as unimportant. They open to the inquiring mind, however, certain questions and certain problems that have an especial interest for teachers, and for students who think.

What do we mean by useful? We mean—do we not?—something which alleviates a physical need, a need like that caused by cold, hunger, or danger. Clothing, food, shelter and defensive weapons were useful to primitive man. They were necessary in the sense that for the lack of them one must pay severe penalties. The failure to provide for these needs meant punishment, quick and relentless, from the hand of Nature. It often means the same to-day. For this reason, food, clothing, shelter and a defensive means of maintaining one's place in the community, have always been regarded soberly, seriously. The tragic alternative that awaits those who fail to gain these advantages, lies ever present in the background, a shadow and a fear.

But in moments of hard-won security, when the fire-light threw back the shadows into a more remote obscurity, when

danger for the moment ceased to threaten; when hunger was satisfied, and a certain dim warmth and comfort took possession of his soul, the Neanderthal or Cro-Magnan man, sitting at his cave door, among the bones strewn there, might choose one to fashion into a flute, or might voice his victories in a howl resembling song; carving or painting meanwhile upon the rock walls, or upon the tusk of the mammoth, a rude likeness of the beast himself.

Thus began music, painting, sculpture, the fruits of idleness, of indolence, of peace. Useful? No, not in a utilitarian sense nor in the tragic sense of maintaining the struggle of life. But none the less useful by fulfilling a need of man's elemental nature, the need of expression. This conforms, in a way, to the best definition of art that I know: that of Elbert Hubbard. He defines it as the expression of a man's joy in his work. It isn't the work that finds expression—not the useful employment, but the joy in it that overflows in new beauty of form and originality of design.

In accordance with this idea even raw technique may prove a source of inspiration. Under the discipline of anatomically designed gymnastic exercises, the fingers of the musician may become so imbued with flexibility and power as to gain a higher intelligence. Rebelling at last against the monotony of drill, they start to dance and then to fly in new and delicious sequences. Scales overflow into arabesques, and figures of spontaneous charm. The slow trill, becoming impatient of restriction, bubbles over into cadenzas and sudden snatches of original melody that spring from one knows not what sub-strata of consciousness.

Oui, l'œuvre sort plus belle
D'une forme au travail
Rebelle,
Vers, marbre, onyx, émail.

Point de contraintes fausses,
Mais que pour marcher droit
Tu chausses,
Muse—un cothurne étroit.

Théophile Gautier—himself a great artist—thus recognised that the underlying motives of inspiration and of improvisation are joy and power—or rather joy because of power, born of technical mastery. It is a great study, this matter of spiritual reactions, the value of which is seldom understood or appreciated even by the psychologists. Not only music but all art is, indeed, an expression of liberty in its highest and finest sense. It expresses

the emancipation of the spirit from the flesh and from the "fell clutch of circumstance." A similar spiritual release was felt even by our primitive ancestors of a pre-historic age, when they painted crude, yet vivid impressions of the wild horse and buffalo on the walls of Altamira.

There have been throughout the history of the world art-epochs that may be likened to these moments in the life of the Magdalenian grotto dweller; periods of peace; breathing spells between the agonies of racking wars; when man paused to rest, to carve or paint, and so doing to sing. At such times he became more and more cognizant of the power that lay within him, and sought ever for new ways of communicating and perpetuating it.

Such brief periods made possible much that was immortal in the art of Greece; such a world-pause gave birth to the Renaissance, and to the Elizabethan age. And the great tidal wave of human progress that carries all before it in this, our present era, bears on its crest the crowning glory of music. Such music, too, as the old world never knew; a new art, elaborated and refined beyond all dreams; which, were it blotted out to-day, might never be called into existence again; remaining for future generations a mystery not to be solved or explained. What, indeed, would survive, if all physical attributes, materials, and records of modern music were to be destroyed? Men and women of the year 5000 would read of it, wonder about it, and try to imagine it, as we do the lost Atlantis. For music, as it has developed in the last three hundred years is something absolutely new in the world's life—that much we know. What other lost arts may have arisen, flourished, and vanished, perhaps, before the flood, none of us will ever learn, not even when the inscriptions are all deciphered, and the stones of long-buried cities reveal their sermons.

In comparison with the stern necessities of life, music may not be "useful," but it is both beautiful and good and, like the power of speech, adds immeasurably to the fullness and value of human social intercourse. To those who have made it a study—who regard it from the standpoint of professionalism—music is a very serious matter. After years of toil the artist acquires a feeling of reverence for his art, as one may love a life-long companion, or as a pupil may revere his master. The older musician, cherishing ever the ideal of good, better, best, in every musical production, cannot regard the making of music as a trivial or unimportant affair. To him it is all-important. Whether useful or not, it is the pivot upon which his life turns. It is like an ever recurring question which must be graciously and beautifully answered.

Every worthy composition holds for him a challenge to equally worthy performance.

And the younger generation—how does it respond to the appeal? Somewhat carelessly, I fear. To the average American boy or girl, educated according to the standardized formulas, the seriousness of the old-school musician is hard to understand. Youth to-day is notoriously lacking in reverence and in a proportionate sense of values. No doubt the safe and sane young person who is growing up in our midst, finds a certain artificiality in the attitude of the artist, attaching, as he does, a life-and-death importance to the pursuit of his beloved vocation.

Then, too, it may be that music has but recently arrived at the point of development long since reached by literature—I mean the period of wide circulation, of commonness, and accessibility. Time was when a book was among the rarest and most precious of earthly possessions; a treasure to be hoarded by kings; a thing so valued as to be encased in gold and precious stones, illuminated by reverent fingers, and, lest it be lost or stolen, chained to the altar of a church.

Invested with similar uniqueness and preciousness were the musical triumphs of yesterday. The inspired moments of Chopin, of Liszt, of Paganini, left indelible impressions upon the minds and hearts of their listeners, as many an old letter and journal will testify.

Those patterns were of infinite value because they could never be duplicated or replaced. And what shall we say of the great improvisations of the past—of the extempore performances of Mozart, of Mendelssohn, and Jenny Lind? Gems cast into the ocean of oblivion, treasures lost beyond recall. No wonder that music was regarded seriously, and listened to with attention and respect. An art at once so lavish and so wasteful might well tantalize the public, and keep it longing for more.

But as books have become common with the invention of printing, so has music with the invention of the player-machines; and the best books and the best music must now share the same careless fate. Always will there be someone to value them, yet the dust gathers thick to-day on Dante, and Milton; while the young folks laugh and chatter through heavenly records of Galli-Curci or of Heifetz, without so much as a pretense at listening. To them it is but a diversion, associated with social hours and the amusements of idleness. In choosing his life-work the boy turns his serious attention to electricity or chemistry; the girl to problems of domestic science, nursing, or the like.

Music a diversion! To us of the older generation it was a divinity. We echo the cry of the vagabond poet:

Où sont les neiges d'antan?

Where, indeed, are the snows of yester-year? The wonders of a day when Mozart's operas were new, and Haydn quartets were given for a really first time, and Schubert was thinking that he had better give up teaching school, and write Erl-Kings all day long?

The average young person of to-day, viewing life more or less superficially, his mental scope confined to the limits of small-town horizons; his critical habits formed upon the primitive and prejudiced attitude of the "bunch" with which he or she gyrates in the amusement-mill of our suburban community life; as a rule profoundly ignorant, despite certain so-called educational advantages, has yet occasional lucid moments in which he places his finger upon the raw and brutal truth.

"What good is all this high-class music, anyhow, except just to harrow up your feelings? Let's play something lively and cut out the sob stuff."

Thus the scion of the new democracy. Not only does he frankly prefer rag-time to Beethoven, he is no longer ashamed of the fact. And he has taken a new stand—he absolutely refuses to practice. Is he not due at the football field directly after class meeting? And the team booked to play Blankboro and Bogustown next week. And he is going to be an electrical engineer, anyhow, so what's the use of bothering with five-finger exercises and all that sort of foolishness?

They're all going to be engineers—surely this nation will be steered on its true course in future years! Engineers, electrical and chemical, civil and uncivil; and as for domestic-science teachers—we are raising such a crop of them as will revolutionize domesticity itself.

Practical, useful, every-day needs appeal to the youth of America to-day. They do not need music now, and cannot realize that the time will ever come when they may need it. They cannot understand that as a resource, a comfort, an almost human companion in hours of loneliness, the friendly acquaintance of a musical instrument is one of the great joys of life; a solace that fills the vacant hours, that uplifts and purifies, that "restoreth the soul."

By music I mean that which demands much time and thought; the music of artistic cultivation, of humble ambitions, prayerfully and earnestly followed; of obedience to teachers; of self-denial,

renunciation, and sacrifice; of the worship of beauty, and the passionate striving to express it;—the old-fashioned music of Charles Auchester, and the “First Violin,” and the “Improvvisatore.” Such was the art of the eighteenth century, when men’s imagination took great flights, and fixed the very stars for their goal. Our coming generation has planted its feet all too firmly upon the solid earth. It has learned to fly physically, but not spiritually.

My own personal belief is that the era of great musical invention is past. That the tunes have all been played or sung. That the accumulated material of past years is better worth while than all our feeble attempts to create a music of the future. That until we can sing eighteenth-century coloratura, and play Paganini’s cadenzas as he himself played them, we had better not try to take any more futile steps ahead.

The Titans have vanished—the gods have passed over the rainbow bridge into Valhalla—the golden age has departed. Its radiance is overshadowed by twilight, a twilight of vagueness and obscurity, of labored difficulties and blind endeavor. Would that we might go back to the joyous days of Josquin des Près, of Palestrina, and Lulli, and begin anew the long bright symphony of three hundred years!